

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE CASE OF BEN AMES WILLIAMS

A Study in Determination

By J. FRANK DAVIS

EDITOR'S NOTE.—Often has it been said in *The Student-Writer* that aspiring authors usually fail to attain success because they are unwilling to pay the price—but never more convincingly than in the following article. In his letter accompanying it, Mr. Davis wrote: "Williams is one fine young man and not a bit spoiled by his spectacular arrival, altho he admits being a trifle stunned and benumbed. As you will gather from my piece about it, I have been greatly impressed with his grit—and its results. When he came out of Dartmouth in 1910, or perhaps 1909, he got a job as cub reporter and deliberately set out to make himself a fiction-writer. The only other man I have ever known who, systematically and with perfect certainty that he could succeed, came out of college, got a newspaper job, and announced that he was going to write stories (meantime, of course, giving value received on the newspaper—the other sort wouldn't succeed at anything) was Earl Derr Biggers, who worked for me as a reporter when I was only city editor of the *Boston Traveler*, and afterward did a 'colyum' on the same paper when I was editor. Biggers went at it in the same cold-blooded way, and also succeeded."

With the lesson of the eighty and three, to be gleaned from the pages following, let those who have been on the point of quitting hold the thought that the picture rights alone of his past year's work brought Williams nearly \$25,000!

AMONG the want-to-be writers—the really earnest, willing, industrious ones—a certain number are always on the point of giving it up; just about ready to decide that when the next rejection slip comes in they will give up. Conceding that if some of them were to quit the future of literature would not be noticeably impaired, we nevertheless know that if all of them should quit the next decade would have lost some of its master story-tellers. And there isn't any way to sort them out and know in advance which will be permanent flivvers and which the authors of the best sellers of 1925 and 1930. So let's suggest to them that they consider the case of Ben Ames Williams.

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My 85

They all know who Williams is, at least they know what he has recently done; he has been one of the rather spectacular "arrivals" among American fiction-writers in the last two or three years. They have read his "All the Brothers Were Valiant"—or, if they haven't, they ought to read it, his "Jubilo," "The Sea Bride," "The Great Accident," "Black Pawl." They have observed that the biggest and highest-paying magazines are printing his work and boasting about it. Perhaps they have guessed that Williams has probably made more money lately than any other of the younger and newer story-writers.

It might do them a whole lot of good also to know that Ben Ames Williams never would have been heard of as an author if he hadn't had a brand of stick-to-it-iveness so rare that whenever it pops up the rest of us are impelled to give three rousing cheers.

In the chapter on "The Attitude of Mind," in your "Helps for Student-Writers," appear these words:

To grow as a writer, one must have regular mental exercise of the proper kind. One must write and thereby develop the power to write. This is the universal law of growth. * * * Knowing then, that as long as he is exercising his faculties, such exercise will eventually bring him full power, why should any writer become discouraged? * * * Never make the foolish and illogical remark: "I know I shall never succeed at this rate." On the contrary, you cannot help succeeding, in good time, in the line along which you direct your growth.

Wherefore, again, consider the case of Williams.

He was making his living as a newspaper reporter, but wanted to learn to write fiction. He believed he could learn. Nothing in the way of hard work unrepaid, seeming masterpieces of plot and English that came back, and printed rejection slips, could shatter this belief. He kept right on plugging, an hour or two every night. He wrote stories, polished them up and sent them away, and they all flew home and roosted in his drawer of rejected manuscripts; and he wrote more stories, polished them up and sent them away, and looked at them sadly when they returned, and added them to the heap in the drawer—and wrote more stories.

This began in 1910. He got his first acceptance after nearly five years, in December, 1914. It brought him a check for \$50. Things looked more cheerful. Then during the whole of 1915 he made about \$250.

Now let the young man or young woman who has sent out three tales and decided, because they were all promptly declined, that there is nothing in this story business except for those already famous (forgetting to wonder how those authors first became famous)—let such persons consider what seems to me to be the most significant set of declination statistics I have ever heard.

Before he made his first sale, Ben Ames Williams wrote and offered to editors upwards of eighty short stories and three novelettes. And upwards of eighty short stories and three novelettes came back.

And don't forget that after he sold one he still plugged on for a year, with nothing much happening. How many times, during that year, a quitter would have said: "It's no use; those little acceptances must have been accidents; the thing to do is to figure I'm cut out to be a newspaper man and try to get at that as well as I can, and forget this fiction-bug." Although of course the quitter wouldn't have got to the first acceptance; he would have stopped far back of the eighty odd and three.

I don't suppose there are twenty fiction-writers in the United States (and they are the Tarkingtons, Churchills, Cobbs, Rineharts and Hursts) who would not like to change incomes with Williams for 1919, but you can gamble there is not one of them who would have begrudged him his success if he had earned ten times as much as he did. After that little history of refusing to be disheartened, he deserves to make a million.

And right here is where some youngster says: "Of course he is selling a lot of stories. Once he had got a reputation, he had no difficulty in disposing of all those things he wrote before he arrived."

So let me assure that neophyte, who still labors under the impression that magazine editors buy names instead of stories, that Ben Ames Williams *has never sold one of those more than eighty short stories and three novelettes*. He not only has never unloaded a line of those earlier efforts, but right now, with editors asking him to hurry and let them have something, he and his literary agent (who happens to be the best one in the United States; I know, because I have done business with him for fourteen years) have an understanding that nothing he writes shall be offered to an editor unless Williams and the agent see a reasonable chance that the tale will be considered *as good or better* than anything he has theretofore done. And that agent doesn't hesitate to declare himself when a yarn is not up to a writer's standard. Again I know; on his advice I have administered chloroform to some of my efforts that I thought were about my topnotch production when they first emerged from the thought-works. (Aspiring young writers, please don't ask me for the agent's name; just now he is not taking on any new clients. Besides, while there are certain advantages in doing business through a first-class agent, what counts with editors is the story, not the channel through which they receive it. A competent literary agent relieves an author of business details and otherwise earns his

commission in many ways, but he has no recipe for selling poor work.)

"Selling stories," Ben Williams says, "is merely a matter of writing reasonably good ones."

That couldn't start any argument with me when he said it, because I have known it for a good many years (in fact, we were talking about an acquaintance who had been knocking the readers for one of the big magazines, and how Williams really worded it was: "Selling stories, as you and I know, is merely a matter of writing reasonably good ones"); but it may interest some of the beginners who have had a different theory.

Every man at all experienced in the business of writing and selling fiction knows that big editors approach every heap of new manuscript with the hope of discovering there the work of a new man or woman who has a story to tell and can tell it. Wouldn't George Horace Lorimer like to come upon a story as good as Booth Tarkington or Irvin Cobb can write which he could buy from a hitherto unheard-of person for a tenth of their rate? He would be a rotten business man if he wouldn't, and I have never heard Mr. Lorimer thus referred to.

And here is another thing Williams said that student-writers may profitably digest:

"One of my theories is that anyone with a reasonable basic knowledge of the English language and enough liking for the game to stick to it can reach the point where he will be able to sell more stories than he can write. The joker in this is, of course, that no one will care enough to stick to the game unless he has the stuff."

In a letter to him the other day I asked if he had any objection to my telling the simple facts of his uphill pull to the folks who read *The Student-Writer*, and he said in the course of his reply: "There's no disgrace in writing bad stories when you can't write good ones, and no disgrace in having written them *if you have the grace to tear them up when you improve the breed.*" The italics are mine. They help to make it clear why, having once arrived, he continues to be among those present.

Ben Williams's success, to those who had never heard of him until his name began to be featured in the big-league magazines, seemed to have come very suddenly, but how very, very slow in arriving it must have seemed to him, during those five years when every single line he wrote came back, and that next year when, after having secured a precarious toe-hold on the lowest rung of the ladder, he still couldn't get started climbing.

However, as has been said a number of times, things often come to those who wait and hustle unceasingly while they wait. So let the disconsolate writer with six, or ten, or twenty rejected manu-

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scripts in his drawer consider, on the days when he most feels like quitting, the eighty-and-more short stories and the three novelettes written by Ben Ames Williams that no magazine subscriber ever has seen or ever will see.

Then the struggler will stick to the game, undiscouraged, if "he has the stuff."

BREAKING RULES

BY TORREY CONNOR

THERE is no rule in story-building without a reason behind it. In the matter of time-unity, the novice questions:

"Why shouldn't a short-story cover a period of ten years?"

The answer is: A story of the present, *lived*, as it were, right before our eyes, is more vital, gripping. It has a reality such as, say, a story told in narrative style never can have. In illustration of the judgment that a short story should not cover a period of years:

The reader is perusing your story, enjoying the atmosphere you have created, absorbed in the pictures you have drawn, getting closer and closer to the heart, the spirit of the story. Then—

"It must have been the year that Molly was ill that ——."

What a wrench before the mind can readjust itself! The atmosphere is dissipated; the "pictures" have vanished. Those persons we were learning to love are almost as strangers to us. A year has passed! Can you meet a friend from whom you have been parted a year and feel the same interest in him that you would feel had you seen him yesterday? No! Things have come into his life of which you know nothing. There is a break. You cannot go

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smoothly on where you left off. It is not the same friendship. He has changed in the year—he must have changed. *It is not the same story.*

"When the time comes that editors shall welcome my work," you may say, "I can disregard these rules—make rules of my own."

When that time comes, you will *not* break the rules. Why should you? By the help of these very rules that now irk you, you have builded your story. They will have become so much a part of your method that you will unconsciously write to rule. When breaking rules only results in muddling your story, why flout the rules?

A VOCABULARY HINT

THE following letter from a student who discovered a lack in her own literary equipment, and a very plausible cure for it, may prove suggestive to others who find themselves in like situation.

Merely by reading two hours of Emerson this afternoon, I made a discovery. To acquire freedom of style, I sat down with a volume of Emerson and, as you suggested, read aloud.

After reading a paragraph twice, I reviewed it to see if I could give the exact definition of every word "right off the bat." Do you know how many words I found in the two hours that didn't belong to my vocabulary? Exactly eighteen. And my next work will be to add them to my working vocabulary.

This experience was a surprise to me, for I am able to read Emerson and thoroughly to enjoy him. In a way, I knew all he was talking about, but I was determined to find out why I couldn't make my work like his writings.

I had never before felt the lack of a broad vocabulary. I have lived here in this little Western town for fifteen years and thoroughly absorbed its "lingo." Another thing that has tended to narrow my vocabulary is that many people misuse words. For that reason I have adhered strictly to those I was sure of, despite the fact that they were sometimes inadequate.

I am never unhappy about anything after I have found out how to overcome the difficulty, and I feel sure that I have at least hit upon a plan that will improve my narrative style. Watch me and see.

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